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THOUGHT AND MENTAL IMAGE, ART AND IMITATION: A PARALLEL.

66 CHOOSE a day on which to represent the most sub-lime and affecting tragedy we have, appoint the most favorite actors, spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations, unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of real sympathy." Burke's insistence, in this passage, on the superior claim made upon interest or emotion by the real event contrasts, or seems to contrast, with Durkheim's discovery that among Australian aboriginal tribes the images of totemic beings are more sacred than the beings themselves.2 A reality can detach interest from a mere representation if Burke's estimate be right; a symbol can excite more emotion than the reality it represents if Durkheim's statement be true. The sides of this antithesis are not in even balance: a real execution does not contrast with a stage-play precisely as a sacred being contrasts with its own symbol nor are spectators in a London theatre Australian aborigines. But Burke himself says

¹ An Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful, 1-15.

² The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, Swain's Trans., Chap. 1.

that words "affect us often as strongly as the things they represent, and sometimes much more strongly."8 thoughts about things frequently do affect us both more powerfully than the things themselves and very differently from them: memories of our past lives often touch us more deeply than those pasts touched us when they were being lived. It is natural to commend memory proportionately to its vigour and actuality in reinstating the past and imagination when it most perfectly simulates reality. "But at the present day," wrote Longinus," the word (imagination) is predominantly used in cases where, carried away by enthusiasm and passion, you think you see what you describe and you place it before the eyes of your hearers."4 Such visualisation, such mental re-creation of sights once seen, seems to be an essential, if not the most essential, duty of imagination and memory. Longinus seems to show some favour to this very natural prepossession. "If you introduce things which are past as present and now taking place," he writes, discussing the historical present, "you will make your story no longer a narration but an actuality." His eve is fixed on actualisation as he notes the visualising effects of questions and interrogation in the oratory of Demosthenes: the rhetorical device of asking questions and giving answers converts description into reality. seems, however, to perceive a power in imagination superior to the mere photographic representation of reality when he contrasts "enthralment" by the "poetical image" with "vivid description" by the rhetorical." Burke saw very clearly that, as a photograph which simply reproduces with fidelity is not art, so imagination is neither mere visualisation of the real nor to be estimated by its success

³ An Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful, 5-7.

⁴ Longinus On the Sublime, trans., Rhys Roberts, 15-1.

⁵ Longinus On the Sublime, trans., Rhys Roberts, 25-1.

⁶ Ibid. 18-1.

⁷ Ibid, 15-8.

in achieving actuality. "To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged; but what painting can furnish out and anything so grand as the addition of one word, 'the angel of the Lord?'"8 Imagination's separateness of office from mere photographic reproduction or simulation of reality is recognised throughout his famous essay as it is recognised in this sentence. He recognises it most explicitly where it is most evident—in the use of words. "I am convinced," he writes of "compound abstracts" like "virtue" or "persuasion," "that whatever power they may have on the passions, they do not derive it from any representation raised in the mind of the things for which they stand." "The influence of most things on our passions is not so much from the things themselves as from our opinions concerning them," he adds, and, again, "poetry and rhetoric do not succeed in exact description so well as painting does; their business is to affect rather by sympathy than by imitation; to display rather the effects of things on the mind of the speaker or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves."¹⁰ Burke is analysing aesthetic and poetic effects but it never is the principle or most important function of imagination to achieve a complete mental simulation of reality or of memory to construct a perfect mental duplicate of the past. Art is not mere imitation, neither is memory, nor imagination. These principles are interdependent, if they are not essentially one, for art is more than imitation because imagination and memory, on which it is founded. are, in their essence, more than mere methods of mental duplication.

Visualisation, mental seeing rather than thinking, or mental seeing for the purposes of thinking, is probably

⁸ Essay On the Sublime and Beautiful, 5-7.

⁹ *Ibid*, 5-2.

¹⁰ Ibid. 5-4.

more prominent in primitive than in civilised men. "There is reason to believe," writes Rivers, "that sensory imagery is more vivid and more necessary to the savage than to civilised persons, many of whom are able to conduct their lives so as to be indistinguishable from the rest though the power of expressing their thoughts by means of sensory imagery is very defective or even wholly absent."

"A difference in such a subjective character as the vividness of imagery among different peoples is not, of course, a theme on which it is possible to produce direct evidence, but the conclusion that imagery is especially vivid and necessary among savage peoples fully accords with their almost exclusive interest in the concrete, with the high degree of development of their powers of observation, and with the accuracy and fullness of memory of the more concrete events of their lives. This conclusion is supported by observation of their demeanour when describing events they have witnessed. I well remember the first time on which I had the opportunity of observing this. On Murray Island, where I gained my first acquaintance with savage people, courts were held by a British official in collaboration with the native chiefs, at which disputes were settled and offences punished. On the first occasion on which I attended these courts an old woman gave a vigorous and animated account of her experience in relation to the case. As she gave her evidence she looked first in one direction and then in another with a keenness and directness which showed beyond doubt that every detail of the occurrences she was describing was being enacted before her eyes. I have never seen a European show by his or her demeanour with an approach to the behaviour of this old women, how closely knowledge and memory depended on sensory imagery."11

After civilisation has made inroads into visualising

¹¹ Dreams and Primitive Culture, pp. 11, 12

power James can say confidently that some people have "practically no visual images,"12 and a "correspondent" that, in spite of many efforts to acquire visual memory, he must make "certain mental notes while observing the object" to "make an accurate memory drawing" because he has "no image worth mentioning" from which to draw his "image of the object." A legion can be decimated without being completely destroyed and visualising power still persists, though scattered among fewer individuals. Professor Titchener says he can read off a memory manuscript.14 He and his fellow-visualisers seem to benefit by not suffering forfeiture of their legacy from the past. It is an advantage to read manuscripts from memory; it is also an advantage for a blindfolded chess-player to see board and men in his mind. An American who played chess blindfolded told Taine that, after a fixed look at the board before the game began, he followed every move in his mind as if he had seen it played. He saw board and men at the end of each move as if there were no bandage on his eyes. He was so used to visualising each move as it was told to him that he was actually more easily deceived when he looked at the board than when he pictured it in his mind. Visualising power also helps in arithmetical calculation: Colborn, a young arithmetical prodigy, told Taine that he saw his calculations clearly before him and "another" that he saw the figures as though they were written on a slate.15.

These feats of visualisation seem to be successes for the real functions of imagination: perfect memory pictures are useful and imagination seems to be dramatic and effective in proportion to its power of presenting pictures—to

¹² Principles of Psychology: Imagination.

¹³ Times Educ. Supp., Jan. 15, 1920. "What Is Imagination?"

¹⁴ Lectures On the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes, Chap. 1.

¹⁵ De L'Intelligence, Tome 2, Chap. 1.

its profusion and vividness of authentic imagery. Visualisers like Titchener and Colborn seem to have escaped from a process of decay which civilisation has inserted into primitive mental powers. Writers, like Shakespeare, who abound in images, who are fertile and vigourous in metaphor, seem to rise to their mental heights because visualisation has tarried with them after departing from others. But visualisation has its victims no less than its beneficiaries. Taine cites the experience of a gendarme who had charge of a condemned criminal and saw his head severed by the knife of the guillotine. The terror of that fatal moment settled on his soul. He imagined that his superior officer, suspecting him of guilt, was planning his arrest; voices shouted accusations at him from the clock; he saw the guard approach and soldiers surrounding his house. He armed himself, fled to a wood and resisted all attempts at capture—driven into exile by obsessing visions.¹⁶ Images, pictures in the mind, which are part of thought, are reacted to as if they were things when they copy reality too faithfully. Vivid visualisation, comparable in vigour and clearness of picture to the actual seeing of physical objects, seduces the mind to confuse things with its thoughts about them. A rush of memory, which is thinking about the past, may momentarily persuade us that we are in the past again. Dreams constantly reinstate the past in literal truth through the posing of memory as actual event. Memory defeats its own purpose when the mental image too vigorously simulates reality and imagination, if it visualises right to the top of its bent, compels the mind to behave as if it were among real scenes instead of being surrounded by thoughts.

Visualisation, mental picturing, also induces a systematic, reflective, theoretical confounding of thoughts with things. Yeats quotes Shelley's saying that "thoughts

¹⁶ De L'Intelligence, Tome 2, Chap. 1.

which are called real or external objects" differ only in regularity of occurrence from "hallucinations, dreams and ideas of madmen." An expositor might conclude from this to an idealistic identification of all things with thoughts, which is one way of interpreting an essential similarity between visual pictures impressed upon the mind by visible objects and visualised images in hallucinations and dreams. Yeats inverts this idealistic identification into a realistic homology of mental images with physical things: instead of making external objects into thoughts or images he makes images into external things like stocks and stones. "If all our mental images no less than apparitions (and I see no reason to distinguish) are forms existing in the general vehicle of Anima Mundi and mirrored in our particular vehicle, many crooked things are made straight."17 Visualisers are always tempted into this psychological or metaphysical delinquency of conferring the externality appropriate to physical things upon mental images. "Forms existing in the general vehicle of Anima Mundi" have obviously received this conference. mental devices for thinking about things (and also about other entities). A writer can invite thought about horses by using the word "horse": the word received as a picture by his readers does not induce them to confuse thinking about the animal with a belief that it stands before them. He can extend the same invitation by drawing a picture of a horse and his readers can again think about horses without supposing them to be present in person. mental picture or image of a horse, as distinct from a perception of a real, present animal, serves the same purpose for thinking as the writer's picture: it is not the animal. or. in essence, an attempt to portray it as if it were present, it is a mental instrument for thinking about it. mental visual image could not be adequately replaced by

¹⁷ Per Amica Silentia Lunae, Chap. 7.

the word "horse" if it were in essence an imaginative attempt to portray the animal and not essentially a means of thinking about it. But the visual images involved in visualisation, because they are instruments of thought based on simulation of the visual aspects of things which convey to us our most impressive and most systematised experiences of outer realities, if imagination centres on them too freely, become confused with external things. They hallucinate if imagination approaches too closely to a positive reproduction of a perceived reality; they promote systematic mental confusion when imagination centres too exclusively upon them as objects, rather than as devices for thinking, without actually conferring upon them the perceptive status of external things. Yeats has obviously succombed to this impulsion into mental confusion. "A. E." also succombs, and unreservedly, to the visualiser's impulse when he writes "But the dream figure or figure of imagination will walk about with authentic motions and indistorted anatomies."

"I imagine," he continues, "a group of white-robed Arabs standing on a sandy hillock, and they seem of such a noble dignity that I desire to paint them. . . I say to myself, 'I wish they would raise their arms above their heads,' and at the suggestion all the figures in my vision raise their hands as if in salutation of the dawn. . . My brain does not by any swift action foresee in detail the pictorial consequences involved by the lifting of arms but yet by a single wish, a simple mental suggestion, the intricate changes are made in the figures of imagination as they would be if real Arabs stood before me and raised their hands at my call." He succombs to the visualiser's impulse because he concludes from experiences like this that images can enter the mind from without. When "A.E." subsequently writes "I remember incidents rather

¹⁸ The Candle of Vision: "Have Imaginations Body?"

than moods, vision more than ecstasy"10 he probably intimates his mental habit of attending more to his visualised images than to their significance: of accepting them as models of realities rather than as means of thinking about these realities. He habitually treats them as models by painting from imagination in preference to sight. The visualising habit, convenient for specific reference in memory, converts the mental image from its essential rôle as an instrument of thought into an actual duplicate or model of external things. The model becomes confused with its prototypes in the outer world and "A. E." can write, treating the mental image as a ball that can be thrown from hand to hand, "I know that with the pictures of memory mingle pictures which come to us, sometimes from the minds of others."20 He can speak of the "etherial medium which is the keeper of such images," thus relegating mental images to the outer existence and persistence of pebbles, of his ability "at times to evoke deliberately out of the memory of nature pictures of persons or things long past in time"21 and even suggest "that images of things to be may come into our sphere out of a being where time does not exist."22 Visualisation has its conveniences and it has its powers, but the essential function of imagination, in all its forms, is not picturing but the use of images as instruments of thought.

Human thought often seems to follow a route decided for it beforehand by the constitution of things and by the equipment of the mind. It was probably inevitable for Plato to start in one such route and write "Then must we not infer that all the poets, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; . . . The poet is like a painter who, as has

¹⁹ Ibid: "Intuition."

²⁰ The Candle of Vision: "The Mingling of Natures."

²¹ Ibid: "The Memory of Earth."

²² Ibid: "The Architecture of Dream."

already been observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler;"28 and "that poetry and mythology are, in some cases, wholly imitative."24 Plato's thought was not tied to a narrow identification of art, even of most prominently representative art like painting, with imitation; but it was very obviously determined by the conception, so naturally adopted in the first instance, of art as skillful copying. Hannay observes that primitive art, like the art of children, attempts to put a line round a mental conception more than it endeavours to represent what the eye perceives.28 But it is always difficult to understand what we really do and it was probably inevitable that aesthetic theory should begin by comparing painting, and even poetry, to copying or imitation. With an equal inevitability aesthetic theory could not persist in this inadequate description of art: Plato's own thought constantly burst through its confining bonds. The core of truth in the imitative theory of art, for artistic expression does employ the representative element of imitation, does, however, continually maintain a sympathy with Burke's dictum:" in the imagination, besides the pain or pleasure arising from the properties of the natural object, a pleasure is received from the resemblance which the imitation has to the original: the imagination, I conceive, can have no pleasure but what results from one or other of these causes."26 Explorative thought, however, because it is explorative, finally recedes from imitation as the constitutive element in art. "Why are we not always pleased," asked Sir Joshua Reynolds, "with the most absolute possible resemblance of an imitation to its original object? Cases may exist in which such a resemblance may be even disagreeable. I shall only observe that the effect of figures in wax-work, though certainly a more exact

²³ Jowett's Trans., Rep. 10, 600, 601.

²⁴ Jowett's Trans., Rep. 3, 394.

^{25 &}quot;Photography and Art": The London Mercury, Jan., 1920.

²⁶ Essay On the Sublime and Beautiful, Introd.

representation than can be given by painting or sculpture, is a sufficient proof that the pleasure we receive from imitation is not increased in proportion as it approaches to minute and detailed reality; we are pleased, on the contrary, by seeing ends accomplished by seemingly inadequate means."27 Sir Joshua's discourses definitely transcend the identification of art with imitation. "If we suppose a view of nature represented with all the truth of the camera obscura, and the same scene represented by a great artist, how little and how mean will the one appear in comparison with the other, where no superiority is supposed from the choice of subject. The scene shall be the same, the difference only will be in the manner in which it is represented to the eye. With what additional superiority then will the same artist appear when he has the power of selecting his materials as well as elevating his style?"28

Mandeville, some fifty years before, still described painting as an imitation of nature, as a "happy deceit" possible through imperfections of sense; and ingeniously, though perversely, suggested that reflections from polished bodies were the first cues to the invention of painting.²⁹ The seduction by the element of counterpart in drawing, sketching, sculpturing or narration, by the representative substratum in art, into identifying art with imitation is hard to resist and difficult to expel. Fidelity in portraiture is still a popular criterion of a picture and it was for long a canon of more reflective opinion. The simulation by the visual mental image, by the mental picture, of outer things, analagous to the simulation by a painting of the scene it represents, has seduced thought into psychological and philosophical conceptions analogously to the imitative theory of art. The identification of artistic conception with

²⁷ Eleventh Discourse.

²⁸ Thirteenth Discourse.

²⁹ A Search into the Nature of Society.

the picture, with the painted image, with the representative sculptured form, with the imitative element in description or narrative, has a natural parallel in the identification of thought with mental image. No one of these indentifications has ever been absolute: reflective minds cannot constantly and consistently regard all artistic conceptions solely as imitations, neither can they continuously suppose an inclusion of all thought in mental imagery. But in both instances a fundamental, dominant prepossession has perpetually infected thinking: artistic conception, on the one hand, has been constantly confused with the picture which embodies it, and the mental image, on the other, has been systematically confounded with the process of thinking it subserves.

The mental image often has a valuable transcriptive function: visualising memory is a mental convenience for the blind-folded chess-player; pictures have frequently a photographic value for those who have lived among the scenes they represent or who desire to realise those scenes; and Burke rightly says that "a pleasure is received from the resemblance to the original." So also it is pleasant simply to have mental pictures of the past. Mere imitation has its pleasures and it has its uses. But exclusive preoccupation with the mental imitative picture or visual image, like persistent centering on the imitative in art, leads to confusion, mystification and error. Some modern tenders of the fires of art protest against the prerogative of imitation by destroying all semblance, in their pictures, to anything in earth or heaven. The mind has done with its imagery, in its own way, what these enthusiasts have done with their pictures. Let any one who is not habitually or preeminently a visualiser, perhaps even then, recover by memory and inspect with attention his mental imagery during a process of thought. He will not usually discover a visualised duplicate of any outward scenes nor an

ordered, mentally imaged version intelligibly reconstructed from such scenes. His imagery, simply as a collection of images, will be a kaleidoscopic chaos. The images themselves will normally be sketchy, shadowy, vague and undefined-mere ghosts of their physical prototypes. The following passage from Burke well expresses the disintegrated spread of imagery through most thought-dissolved in the mental process like salt in water. "If I say, 'I shall go to Italy next summer' I am well understood. Yet I believe nobody has by this painted in his imagination the exact figure of the speaker passing by land or by water, or both; sometimes on horse-back, sometimes in a carriage; with all the particulars of the journey . . . it is not only of those ideas which are commonly called abstract, and of which no image at all can be formed, but even of particular, real beings, that we converse without having any idea of them excited in the imagination; as will appear on a diligent examination of our minds."30

It is probable that many dreams essentially raise up before consciousness, into a more vivid realisation, the disbursed and depressed imagery involved in a sequence of thought. Titchener tells us that he habitually receives, when thinking of modesty, a "visual hint" in a visual image of a graceful, bending female form. If he thought of one of his students, "Mr. Smith should be more modest," his mind might, during the night, confer upon the mental images involved the perceptive status of a dream. Mr. Smith would appear in the dream in person, since the mental picture of his person would carry Titchener's thoughts about him; modesty would appear in the guise of its "visual hint"—a modest young lady. Thus a dream of a somewhat sentimental meeting might result from a prominence in consciousness given to the imagery of a

³⁰ Essay On the Sublime and Beautiful, 5, 5.

³¹ Lectures On the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes, Chap. 1.

thought. The illusion inherent in the dream would depend upon diverting the mental images from their proper function as devices for thinking to imitations of real events. If dreams do so arise, whether at times or always, they intimate to us, by our false reactions to relatively vivid images as if they were realities, how shadowy our normal imagery is, and frequently, by their wandering or by their eccentric combinations, how chaotic is the imaginative part of thought. Rivers thinks the visualising habit is stronger among primitive and more degenerate among civilised peoples. The pulverising of mental imagery as development proceeds warns us off false estimates of the image, as modern chaoses in paint seek to divert mistaken emphasis on the imitative in art.

The tendency to consider mental imagery as essentially imitative, as a collection of photographs, instead of realising that the mind more resembles, in Titchener's phrase, a picture gallery of impressionist notes, long confused discussions on General Ideas. We certainly have general ideas for we can speak or think of "man" in a general sense and "animal" is as intelligible with a universal as with a particular significance. The capable thinkers of the past were not entirely in the dark but their mental vision was obscured by a confusion between "idea" or "thought" and "mental visual image." A mental picture of a horse is individual or particular; it may, however, assist the mind to think about horses in general: it may refer to all horses though it only portray one. Mental imagery, visualisation, before it produced this perplexity, apparently had a previous effect of hindering any formation of general ideas at all: before puzzling philosophers about the nature of general ideas it prevented them from acquiring them. Many observers have noted that primitive people tend to identify a drawing or picture of any animal with a particular individual. Wernlé says, for example, that East African

natives always draw particular crocodiles, never representing crocodiles in general by a picture of one. English child soon understands that a picture of a canary in its animal book represents many canaries; the East African identifies a picture of a crocodile with the one he saw yesterday or with the one which ate his grandfather.³² Visual mental images tend to persuade the mind, as pictures of crocodiles persuade East African natives, of the presence of some particular things or scenes. indulge this tendency by convincing the dreamer that he is in a boat or pursued by a tiger or falling through a window. The natural mental tendency, insistent in primitive identification of pictures of crocodiles with special crocodiles and emphatic in persistent comparison of the visual mental image with an attempt to reproduce reality completely, to regard all representations merely as reproductive facsimiles resulted naturally in supposing art to be imitation and in erroneous notions about the function and nature of mental imagery.

Berkeley could realise that a picture of a crocodile need not refer to the particular crocodile that he happened to have seen the day before but he had difficulty in understanding how an individual mental image need not represent only a single individual. "The idea of a man that I frame to myself," he writes, "must be either of a white, or a black, or a tawny, a straight, or a crooked, a tall, or a low, or a middle-sized man, I cannot by any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea of man." Hobbes also considered it erroneous to speak of the idea of anything as universal because there cannot be in the mind an image of a man which is not the image of some one man. The fascination of the mental image, its obstrusiveness, per-

³² Native Life in East Africa.

³³ Principles of Human Knowledge, Intro. 10.

³⁴ Elements of Philosophy, 1-3.

sistently induced mental confusion by persuading men to identify imagery with thinking. In a parallel fallacy art was supposed to be imitation by mistakenly identifying picture with conception.

A day by the sea-shore is pictured, five years after, in memory. No particular emotion prominently connected itself, at the time, with the events of that day. The time was filled with action—with walking, bathing, conversation and the detail of life's round. No action is invited by the remembrance, which, in place of it, instals the reminiscent mood. The peculiar emotion characteristic of reflective reminiscence, springing from the memory of past scenes, differs from the feelings excited when those past scenes were real. Living through an event and remembering it are two different experiences and have their own separate emotional accompaniments. If memory literally reinstated the past it would restore a moment of time to its original being. But the function of mental imagery, even in memory, where duplication of the past event is most complete, is not to imitate but to present for thought. The more perfectly imitation is secured, for mental imagery often alludes to its theme by employing an element of imitation, the less perfectly is imagination's office discharged. Insistently imitative or reduplicative images hallucinate and destroy rational thought by falsely simulating reality, as dreams delude us into mistaking the imaginary for the real. "The truth is, if poetry gives us a noble assemblage of words corresponding to many noble ideas which are connected by circumstances of time or place, or related to each other as cause and effect, or associated in any natural way, they may be moulded together in any form, and perfectly answer their end. The picturesque connection is not demanded; because no real picture is formed;"35 it took longer to perceive that what Burke here realises to be true

³⁵ Essay On the Sublime and Beautiful, 5-5.

of poetry may also be true of painting viz. there need be no "picturesque connection," no imitation. Art is not mere imitation, nor necessarily imitation at all, for the same reason that mere visualisation, simple portrayal, complete duplication, is not the essential function of mental imagery. Mental images resemble real objects, when they discharge their unperverted or primary function, only sufficiently to direct the mind to the themes they subserve—only sufficiently to secure adequate allusion. They can allude adequately without being directly representative at all: words, which can appear as mental visual images, have no claim to be considered imitative. Accurate visualisation has subsidiary uses: reading off memory manuscripts is a convenience and accurate reproduction in memory may recover significant fact. But mental imagery has for its chief use the impressing of past experiences into the service of thought.

The possibility of an impressiveness in the symbol superior to the impressiveness of the thing symbolised is obviously inherent in the essential function of mental imagery. The memory picture of a past event is a symbol of that event. The emotional reaction to the reminiscent symbol may be greater, and often is greater, than to the event symbolised because the symbol does not require the practical reaction, the actual living towards, demanded by the reality. An external symbol may resemble the mental image in freely admitting emotional reaction by suppressing the need for the customary habitual reactions of life.

Art takes advantage of this principle. Imitation, pure and simple, would tie it to a poor repetition of the actual. By transcending the imitative art secures another value which may be richer than the value of actuality itself.

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